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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the conflicts that women experience when they combine work and family roles into one life style. This study focused on how the issue of the marriage-career conflict played itself out in the lives of women who graduated from college in 1967. Data were obtained from a stratified random sample of female college graduates who had participated in the Michigan Student Study (Gurin, 1971). One-third of the sample (Role-Innovators) wanted occupations in which less than 30% of the workforce was female; one-third (Traditionals) wanted occupations in which at least 50% of the workforce was female; and one-third (Moderates) wanted occupations in which between 30% and 50% of the workforce was female. Results revealed that women who expected marriage-career conflict in 1967 also gave a higher priority to career, chose a more Role-Innovator occupation, spent more time in the labor force, and actually worked in a Role-Innovator occupation. Getting married, having children, and ending up in a more traditional occupation were all associated with more frequent reports of conflict in 1981, and with more changes from not expecting conflict in 1967 to actually experiencing conflict in 1981. Neither timing of marriage nor number of children was related to changes in conflict. It appears that women who stay in the labor force develop strategies for reconciling career and marriage demands; and that women who do not develop such strategies both increase their feelings of conflict and decrease their labor force participation. (NB)

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ANTICIPATING IT, USING IT, MINIMIZING IT

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Marriage-Career Conflict: Anticipating it, Using it, Minimizing it

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Much has been written about the conflicts that women experience when they combine work and family roles into one life-style. Early discussions of this pattern assumed both that such conflict was inevitable and that it had negative consequences for the women experiencing it. More recent investigators have found evidence that multiple role lifestyles are actually conducive to mental health and life satisfaction. In this paper we focus on the question of how the issue of marriage-career conflict played itself out in the lives of a sample of women who graduated from college in 1967: whether they anticipated it, actually experienced it, and what effect it had on their choices regarding work, marriage, and family. We were particularly interested in whether women who anticipated marriage-career conflict would be more successful than other women in finding ways to cope with or minimize such conflict.

This study begins with a stratified random sample of women graduating from college who participated in the Michigan Student Study (Gurin, 1971). One third of the sample were Role-Innovators, that is, women who said they wanted to go into occupations in which less than 30 percent of the workforce was female. One third were Traditionals, who were going into occupations in which half or more

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, 1987. The 1967 and 1970 data sets for this study are archived at The Henry A. Murray Research Center, Radcliffe College, are used with the Center's permission, and are available for secondary analysis by qualified researchers.

of the workforce was female. And one third were Moderates, those whose occupational choices had workforces that were between 30 and 50 percent female. Several personality, background, and college experience factors differentiated these three groups. They have also been followed up on two occasions, the first occurring three years after they graduated, in 1970, and the second fourteen years after graduation, in 1981.

Preliminary findings suggested that the anticipation of conflict--at least for those committed to having a career in 1967--stimulated the development of a lifepath strategy conducive to minimizing such conflict without sacrificing career commitment. For instance, the women who anticipated marriage-career conflict in 1967 were more than twice as likely to have continued working without major interruptions, than those who did not anticipate conflict. Other univariate analyses supported this line of thought. We focussed on three outcomes: degree of Role-Innovation, that is, the unusualness of one's occupation for women; persistence in the workforce; and felt conflict in 1981. Although the first two outcomes are related, in that Role-Innovation is associated with greater workforce participation, they are conceptually and empirically distinct.

In 1967 the women who wanted to go into Role-Innovative careers were the most likely to expect that marriage and a career would conflict. But in 1981, those who are actually employed in Role-Innovative or Moderate occupations report less conflict than those employed in Traditional occupations. In fact, those who became MORE Role-Innovative over the 14 years report the least

conflict in 1981, while those who became more Traditional or remained Traditional--as well as those who continued to be Role-Innovators--report the most conflict. This reversal appears to be mediated by the ways that these women organize their choices. Before describing these choices, we should point out the apparent anomaly that the continuing Role-Innovators--those who began as Role-Innovators in 1967 and were indeed working in Role-Innovative occupations in 1981--should resemble the Traditionals in having high levels of conflict in 1981, while those who began as Traditionals (or Moderates) and became more Role-Innovative have the least conflict. It may be that the latter group are those who, given the changes in cultural norms for women during the time period we are studying, were those most likely to feel that they were "going with the flow", while each of the other groups could feel out of step with the cultural trends either at the beginning or the end of the study period.

Next we examined how their plans for marriage and childbearing in 1967, and the actual occurrence of these events, are related to persistence and change in Role-Innovation, briefly recapping our earlier paper (Tangri & Jenkins, 1986). Women who started out as Role-Innovators and are actually working in Role-Innovative occupations in 1981 wanted from the beginning of the study to marry later and to start having children later than any of the other groups of women, while those who became more Traditional over the course of the study wanted in 1967 to marry earlier and to have children earlier than any of the other groups. There were no differences among these groups in how many children they wanted in 1967.

These data suggested that persistence in a more Role-Innovative career would be facilitated by anticipating the potential conflict with marriage and childbearing and strategizing to forestall or minimize the conflict by delaying marriage and childbearing.

However, in actual behavior we found no differences among these groups in timing of first marriage or first birth. There are, however, large differences among them in the number of children they had had by 1981: Those who became more Role-Innovative or continued to be Moderates had the fewest children, while those who became more Traditional or continued to be Traditional had the most children. Thus, it appears that number of children rather than the timing of their birth, or of marriage, became the strategy most facilitative of longer-term Role-Innovation.

We therefore sought to determine whether such strategies were facilitative of long-term Role-Innovation because they reduced marriage-career conflict, and what other factors might serve a similar function. These next data look at influences associated with reductions and increases in conflict. For this purpose the sample is divided into four Conflict groups: Those who started and remained unconflicted, those who started and remained in conflict, those who became less conflicted and those who became more conflicted.

But why do some women expect marriage-career conflict in the first place, and others do not? One factor is the degree of importance they attach to having a career. The more important

having a career is to them in 1967, the more likely they are to anticipate it will conflict with being married. Another measure of the priority given to career is the extent to which they agreed in 1970 with the statement "I want and intend to have a career. My husband will have to adjust accordingly." The stronger their agreement with this statement--which is pretty strong by 1970 standards--the greater the reported conflict, both in 1970 and in 1981. So, expecting in 1967 that marriage and career will conflict is associated with giving a higher priority to career, with choosing a more Role-Innovative occupation, with ultimately spending more time in the labor force, and with ending up in a Role-Innovative occupation. The next question is whether certain life-path strategies do in fact lessen, and others increase, the likelihood that one will experience conflict between marriage and pursuit of one's career.

This does indeed appear to be the case. Getting married, having children, and ending up in a more Traditional occupation are all associated with more frequent reports of conflict in 1981, and more changes from not expecting conflict in 1967 to actually experiencing conflict in 1981. But neither timing of marriage, nor number of children is related to changes in conflict.

Of these findings related to conflict, the most surprising is that it is the women in Traditional occupations in 1981 rather than the Role-Innovators, who are experiencing the most conflict, in part because for some of these women, moving into a Traditional occupation was motivated by a desire to decrease marriage-career conflict. Perhaps their conflict is related to feelings that their

strategy has confined them to occupations offering a lower level of occupational satisfaction, or pay, or it may be related to their husband's attitude. We do find that women who are experiencing conflict in 1981 report having husbands or partners who are less supportive of their working than the women who are not experiencing conflict.

Other variables on which the conflict change groups differ significantly are the importance they gave to their career while in college, the commitment they had to returning to the workforce after having children, and their or their partner's (perceived) conception of the wife role as a source of conflict with working. Women who reported marriage-career conflict in both 1967 and 1981 gave the highest importance to their career while in college, and expressed the strongest commitment to returning to work after childbearing. Women who started out expressing no conflict but reported experiencing conflict in 1981 were those most likely to see the demands of the wife role as being in conflict with having a career.

Our next step was to see if we could find a pattern of variables that would differentiate the four conflict groups (increased conflict, decreased conflict, continuing no conflict, and continuing conflict). For this purpose we performed a stepwise discriminant function analysis, using variables suggested by the foregoing univariate results. Three functions emerged consistently over several variations on this attempt to build a model that would predict changes in marriage-career conflict. The first function differentiates those who became more conflicted from those who

became less conflicted and those who started and remained unconflicted. It consists of variables related to role choice: those who have worked consistently, do not define the wife role as a source of marriage-career conflict, and describe their husbands as not resisting their working, become or remained less conflicted over time while those who show the opposite values on those variables become more conflicted over time.

The second function discriminates the decreased conflict group from those who continued to be either conflicted or not conflicted. Women who at the beginning and the end of the fourteen year period reported either conflict or no conflict both times rated themselves high on career commitment and importance of career while in college.

The third function differentiates the continuing conflict group from all others: these women were more likely to have started and remained Role-Innovators, fewer were Continuing Traditionals, they said their careers were very important to them in 1967, and they said in 1970 that their husbands would have to adjust to their having a career.

It is not clear why the domestic side of the lifepath variables, like timing of marriage and children, and number of children, do not make significant contributions to these functions (although husband's attitude does). On the other hand, it is heartening to find that the priorities, values and choices made in 1967 are as determinative as they are.

Broadly, our interpretation of these analyses are as follows. The women who stay in the labor force find ways to do so, resolving their feelings of conflict by developing strategies for reconciling career and marriage demands. One such strategy might be lowering perfectionist standards to more realistic levels in either or both domains. Another is letting go of cultural norms that define the wife-mother role in ways that exclude employment. A third is choosing a partner or husband who doesn't stand in her way, or resocializing a resistant one. It appears that women who do not develop such strategies both increase their feelings of conflict and decrease their labor force participation.

Reference

- Gurin, Gerald (1971) A Study of Students in a Multiversity. Ann Arbor, Mich: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

Conflict Change Groups' Means on DFA Variables

DFA Variables	Cont'd Conflict	Cont'd No Conflict	Increased Conflict	Decreased Conflict	F
V2	1.38462	2.26087	2.15625	2.08696	3.612**
V18	2.38462	2.08696	1.59375	1.52174	7.548****
V579	8.00000	8.00000	7.25000	5.56522	5.834***
V70x91	3.00000	2.34783	2.68750	2.30435	1.481 ns
GRPRI81	1.46154	2.17391	2.28125	1.73913	3.914**
WRKCONT	4.07692	3.95652	3.06250	4.21739	4.03 ***
RWFROL81	.46154	.17391	.81250	.21739	6.270****
PTRRES81	.30769	.13043	.43750	.08696	2.102 ns
CNTRINOV	.53846	.13043	.21875	.30435	2.676*
CNTTRAD	.00000	.34783	.40625	.17391	3.377**
INCRROLI	.15385	.21739	.09375	.34783	1.923 ns
INCRTRAD	.15385	.13043	.18750	.13043	0.1512 ns

*p<.10

**p<.05

***p<.01

****p<.001

V2 = 1967 Role-Innovative Group (Role-Innovators, Moderates, Traditionals)

V18 = 1967 Importance of Career

V579 = Commitment to work after having children

V70x91 = "Husband will have to adjust to my having a career"

GRPRI81 = 1981 Role-Innovation Group

WRKCONT = Working without interruption

RWFROL81 = Wife role as source of conflict

PTRRES81 = Partner's resistance to career

CNTRINOV = Role-Innovator in 1967 and 1981

CNTTRAD = Traditional in 1967 and 1981

INCRROLI = More Role-Innovative in 1981 than in 1967

INCRTRAD = More Traditional in 1981 than in 1967